FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

RECLAMATION OF ABANDONED URANIUM EXPLORATION SITES

BIGHORN CANYON NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area was established after the building of the Yellowtail Dam created the 70- mile long Bighorn Lake in 1966. Lake based recreation remains an important use of the park but the surrounding desert and plateaus offer a beautiful and unique landscape that has outstanding scenic and biological values. In the 1950's, there was extensive exploration for uranium in the park. Over 350 exploration pit and mound structures were excavated and left. In many areas, these abandoned mineral lands (AML's) were a significant disturbance in otherwise nearly pristine desert and steppe landscapes. Since natural reclamation proceeds very slowly in the arid environment, a series of projects was developed to re- contour these sites and plant them with native seed. An environmental assessment (EA) was prepared in 2002- 2003 to assess for possible adverse effects of reclamation, especially in areas where heavy equipment was necessary, and to provide an opportunity for the public to comment on the proposed reclamation program. Concerns identified during scoping and evaluated in the EA included: soils; biotic communities; threatened and endangered species; archeological resources; visual resources and topography; and visitor use and experience.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The preferred alternative is Alternative B or reclamation of the abandoned uranium exploration sites by a combination of re- contouring and seeding with native seed. The larger sites next to the old mining access routes would be re- contoured by a rubber tired backhoe when the ground was dry. The smaller and more remote sites would be re- contoured by hand as well as those near archeological sites and other sensitive areas. All would be seeded with non- controversial native plant seed from a local native seed supplier. In on heavily disturbed area, there is a possible need for cutting down a few Juniper osteosperma trees in a dense stand to allow access. A total of 153 sites representing 4.5 acres would be done by hand and 91 sites with a total 10.4 acres done by backhoe. Before re- contouring, each site would be rechecked for plant species of concern, noxious weeds and archeological artifacts. After a natural appearing contour was achieved, each site would be seeded with native grass and shrub seeds of the species found near the sites. The seeds are from a native seed nursery located in the Bighorn Basin and are certified weed free. Soil amendments such as soil lock and mulch would be used as appropriate to the site. For further increase of the boundary layer in this high wind environment, each site would be covered with dead juniper and sagebrush collected from near the site. The dead wood would be taken off the sites after three to five years. Each site would be monitored for noxious weeds and treated as indicated.

Soil analysis would be done on the larger sites and some representative soils in the smaller sites after re- contouring. The selection of soil amendments like fertilizer and additional organic matter would be guided by the results of the soil analysis.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The other alternative considered was Alternative, A which is to leave the 153 abandoned uranium exploration sites as they are. There would be no actions to re- contour the AML's. The process of regeneration would continue by erosion and natural reseeding which in this desert environment is very slow. There would be no attempts to speed up the process of vegetative succession by planting native plants.

The environmentally preferred alternative was determined by applying the criteria suggested in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), which is guided by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The CEQ provides direction that "[t]he environmentally preferable alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's Section 101...:"

- fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
- assure for all generations safe, healthful, productive, and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
- attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
- preserve important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice;
- achieve a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
- enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.

Alternative B, the preferred alternative, is the environmentally preferred alternative. Implementing the plan for reclamation of the abandoned uranium exploration sites would give the maximum protection of the natural and cultural resources of Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area with the least possible risk to human and environmental health and safety. Reclamation of these AML's will integrate resource protection with opportunities for and appropriate range of visitor uses, which preserves important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage.

WHY THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

As defined in CFR 1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse

Minor impacts of the preferred alternative include some short- term compaction of the soils, some trampling of nearby plants, increase in early successional weedy plant species for a few years and closing of two trails for a day or two. Beneficial effects include revegetation of over 15 acres with native plants, improved safety and topography and visual beauty of the previous AML areas, and improved quality of visitor experience on the trails near the AML's

Degree of effect on public health or safety

The actual reclamation of the AML's will have no effect on public health and safety. The re- contouring of some of the larger AML's near hiking trails, will remove a potential hazard.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas affected.

As described in the EA, no effects to natural or cultural resources were identified for the preferred alternative. There are no prime farmlands, wetlands, floodplains, wild or scenic rivers, wilderness areas or ecologically critical areas affected.

Degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial

No appreciable controversial effects on the quality of the human environment were identified. In spite of a 45- day comment period and extensive distribution of the EA, there were no public comments. Some informal comments before and after the period of review were positive and addressed an appreciation for more trails and how much better the mounds would look after re- contouring.

Degree to which the possible effect on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks

As described in the EA, the reclamation of the AML's was started in 1983, when the project was considered to fit the criteria for a categorical exclusion. While the project was put on hold after D.O.12, there was still extensive information on the results and potential hazards involved in reclamation of the AML's. No risks to or effects on the quality of the human environment were identified in the EA related to this project.

Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration

This action would set a precedent for future actions only to the degree that the results of this project would be used to aid in the development of the details of future revegetation

projects. The principle of reclamation of disturbed areas for weed control, restoration of natural communities and erasure of non- historic human disturbances is established by the NPS guidelines for resource management and this action would not affect the principles upon which it is based.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts

There were no identified adverse cumulative effects from this project and similar projects in the past or future. Over time, the reclamation of areas of disturbance would have the cumulative beneficial effects of increased forage, less disturbance for weed invasion, improved topography and more natural visual appearance.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources.

Of the seven sites within Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area listed on the National Register of Historic Places, only the Bad Pass Trail is located near AML's . For these few AML's prevention of any damage was easily accomplished. The AML sites them selves do not fit the criteria for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Compliance with §106 of the National Historic Preservation Act was completed with a concurrence with the NPS determination of no effect by both the Wyoming and Montana State Historic Preservation Offices in September, 2003.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered species or its critical habitat.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with the NPS determination of no effect on threatened and endangered species on July 7, 2003.

Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state or local environmental protection law

This action violates no federal, state or local environmental laws.

Impairment

In addition to reviewing the list of significance criteria, the National Park Service has determined the implementation of the project will not constitute an impairment of Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area's resources and values. This conclusion is based on a through analysis of the environmental impacts described in the Reclamation of Abandoned Uranium Exploration Sites/EA, the public comments, relevant scientific studies and the professional judgment of the decision- maker guided by the direction in *NPS Management Policies 2001* (2000). Although the project has some minor negative impacts, in all cases the adverse impacts are the result of actions taken to preserve and restore other park resources and values. Overall the project results in benefits to park

resources and values as well as opportunities for their enjoyment. It does not result in their impairment

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The environmental assessment was made available for public review during a six- week period ending July 15, 2003. After a widespread announcement made through all local papers, copies of the EA were made available at both visitor centers in the park and on the park website. Hard copies of the EA were sent to potentially interested agencies including those involved in the original scoping effort. After six weeks of review, there were no public comments.

CONCLUSION

The preferred alternative does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). The preferred alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Negative effects that could occur are negligible to minor and short- term. There are no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any federal, state or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Recommended:_____ _____
Darrell Cook- Superintendent Date

Approved:_____ _____
Intermountain Regional Director Date